

DECATUR, ILL.
(COURTHOUSE)

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DECATUR

Illinois Decatur Courthouse

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Historic Headquarters

By Leah A. Kazmark

THE Boy Scouts of Decatur, Illinois, have the honor of meeting in an old log cabin which once served as courthouse in pioneer years when a tall fellow in a stovepipe hat, carrying a worn carpet bag brimming with papers, and a great green umbrella secured with twine since its handle was missing, entered its door to try his hand at legal affairs of the village. Lawyer Lincoln, himself!

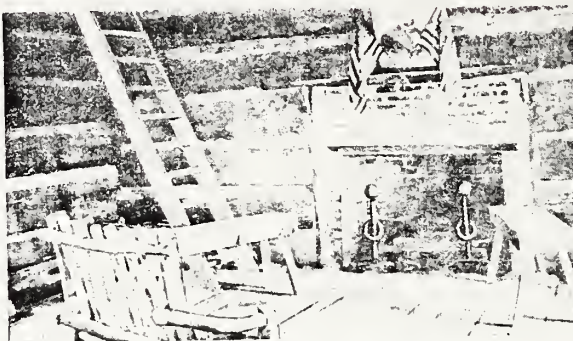
Though the historic old building belongs to the city, the Scouts may use it freely, as their own, and not only are meetings held within it but its punchoon floors and rafters ring with jolly boyish affairs such as steak fries and overnight visits.

On patriotic days and on Sundays, the Scouts are present to hold open house, for travelers from all over the country come to visit the old cabin. It was in the year 1829 that Macon County was erected and a courthouse was necessary. Public-spirited neighbor folks turned out with ready axes; among these was John Hanks (a relative of Abe Lincoln), who had left Kentucky to take up land in Illinois. He had chosen a site on the Sangamon River, southwest of the little settlement. Liking the place, his folks agreed that Tom Lincoln's family, now in Indiana, "might as well come on," so next year he wrote his Indiana relatives that land was cheaper and better in Illinois, and Thomas Lincoln loaded his few belongings into an ox wagon, hitched up the team of oxen, and started. Abe was just twenty-one at this time, and history relates that he drove the team to the new home.

ARRIVING at Decatur, Illinois, the Lincolns stopped first at the square which now bears their name. Here they could most quickly find out the way to "the Hankses'." The new courthouse, trim and fragrant with clean wood, stood on one corner of the little village square, and while the tall lad in hickory shirt, jean trousers far too short for his long legs, and homemade cow-hide boots, watered the team at the ready pump, he must have looked with interest at the imposing edifice—that two-storied cabin with an elegant chimney of huge size at its back! Little did young Abe dream that some years later he was to enter that pioneer building to try his cases at the bar!

Thomas Lincoln remained only about a year on the river some five miles southwest of the town. Then, true example of restless pioneer rover that he was, he traveled on in search of cheaper and better lands. Young Abe went up the Sangamon River to New Salem, where, finding an old commentary on law in the bottom of a barrel, he began his legal studies in his spare time.

Years later he was to return to Decatur as a traveling lawyer. "Riding the circuit," his new duties were called in those early days, for the judge and lawyers traveled by wagons and buggies from county seat to



Interior of the old Macon County courthouse, restored by the D. A. R. in 1908



First courthouse in Macon County, Illinois, in which Lincoln practiced law

county seat, trying the cases of the community.

It was a great event of the season when "Court" arrived in town, driving up to the local inn, amid noisy greetings and clamor.

"Lincoln's come!" sounded about town when the tall figure in his high hat, which added to his height, was seen to alight with the Court. The young people flocked about him. He had ever a good story to tell them and a promise to pitch a game of horseshoes on the village green after the afternoon legal session was over. In the evening the town-folks crowded into the tavern to hear the news of the day. Friendly Lincoln was ever ready to share what he knew; to discuss and explain a recent law, to give helpful advice, and to mingle it all with a humor that was the delight of the younger listeners.

The records he left of the numerous cases

he tried during this early period of his career are well worth studying. Whether it was so small a matter as the ownership of a pig, or the rights of a great new railroad (he was attorney for the Illinois Central during these years), Lincoln stuck to the motto he had set for himself when he started out in the legal profession: "Resolve to be an honest lawyer at any event, and if you can't be an honest one, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer."

With such a background, it is an interesting and historic courthouse which the Decatur Scouts call their own. It now

stands on a fine wooded knoll in the city park restored as far as possible to its sturdy beauty; a fine example of pioneer log cabin now becoming rarer and rarer in America. The Daughters of the American Revolution saw to its being moved to this sheltered spot some years ago. In dismantling it, on its earlier site, each log was numbered, so that when the cabin was again set up it might be in every detail exactly as it was when John Hanks and the friendly Decatur folks swung their axes that built it.

A bronze plate on the cabin tells something of its interesting history. Students and biographers of Lincoln such as Ida Tarbell and William E. Barton have traveled far to see this old building, and at their suggestion Decatur hopes in the future to place the entire cabin under shelter so that it may be preserved for generations to come.

The Decatur Mail 2-7-31

Ill, Decatur, First Court House



36. THE OLD COURT HOUSE. DECATUR. ILL. An interesting event of Lincoln's journey to the State Convention at Bloomington in '56, was his meeting with Henry C. Whitney at Decatur. They strolled out to a spot near the Court House and Lincoln remarked: "Here is the exact spot where I stood by our wagon when we moved from Indiana twenty-six years ago; this isn't six feet from the exact spot." *A tablet now marks the site.* Whitney, On the Circuit, p.74.





